

You Can't Choose Family by the zesty lemon

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Friendship, Humor

Language: English

Characters: Dustin H., Eleven/Jane H., J. Hopper, Steve H.

Status: Completed

Published: 2019-04-07 19:38:23

Updated: 2019-04-07 19:38:23

Packaged: 2019-12-12 20:35:02

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 6,516

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Steve learns that the saying: "you can choose your friends, but you can't choose family" is total bullshit.

You Can't Choose Family

A/N: Please consider reading my other two stories: An Accidental Code Red and A Different Kind of Code Red. This is a companion piece to those two and there are some references that might confuse you otherwise. :)

I hope you enjoy!

It was a mistake to accept the invitation for dinner with his parents.

Steve only said yes because his birthday was later that week and his mom always loved making a big deal of birthdays. Despite all the sourness between him and his dad, he wasn't going to take that away from her.

So, against his better judgment, Steve went.

Dinner was even more disastrous than anticipated. His old man always had to be number one on the throne of assholes, but he really outdid himself this time.

It started out innocently enough.

In the tense silence of dinner, Steve's mom asked how he was doing (as though his dad hadn't kicked him out of the house five months ago). She politely and pointedly sidestepped the giant Godzilla sized elephant in the room—Steve's decision to join the Hawkins Police Department instead of following in his dad's footsteps.

His mom succeeded for the most part, until his dad finally cracked just before dessert.

With a sharp, bored sigh, he put his utensils down when Steve's mom left the room to fetch the cake she baked especially for this evening and asked:

"Are you done yet?"

Steve's jaw tensed. He knew exactly what his father was talking about, but he wanted the old man to spell it out.

"With what, exactly?"

"Don't play stupid. I didn't raise a stupid boy." His father eyed him while he took a sip of his whiskey. "When are you going to quit the Hawkins Police Department and get a real job?"

He said the word police, in a tone that burrowed right under Steve's skin.

"A real job like what, dad? Pushing papers around a desk all day? Signing clients? No thanks."

The muscle in his father's jaw ticked. "So what? You're going to be some beat cop under that drunk loser forever? You're an embarrassment. Just like he is."

Chair legs screeched sharply against the floor and it took Steve a moment to realize that he's the one who made the noise. The dining chair teetered precariously for a moment behind him before recovering from the sudden movement.

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve noticed his mom reenter the room, a too-cheery smile plastered to her perfectly done up face, birthday cake in hand.

"Jim Hopper is a hell of a better man than both of us. Is there anything else you want to say? I'm all ears. Happy birthday to me, right?"

The smile slid right off his mom's face; her steps slowed.

His father's lips curled into the beginnings of a sneer, the grip on his glass became painful looking. "You really could have made something of yourself, but you're a failure of a son. The only thing that could make this worse is if you were a fag too."

His mother gasped.

"No. The only thing that would be worse is if I turned into you. Thank god you kicked me out old man, you really did me a favour."

"Get out."

"Gladly."

There's so much anger, adrenaline and raw hurt pumping through Steve that he somehow makes it to the front door without even really seeing anything in front of him. He didn't hear his mother calling him until he was standing at the front coat rack.

"He didn't mean it." His mom pleaded, wringing her perfectly manicured hands in nervous habit. "Your father just wants what's best for you, Steve."

Steve really tried to ignore how his mother couldn't meet his eyes.

He reached for his coat and shrugged it on.

She made no move to stop him.

"I don't think that's true mom and you know it. Thanks for dinner."

And then he was out into the night air, cold, breathless and feeling as though he was going to explode in a thousand different directions all at once.

...

You know what they say: it gets worse before it gets better?

Total bullshit.

Just because he's Steve fucking Harrington—it gets worse and then it gets worse.

Dinner with his parents left its mark on Steve, if the dark cloud hanging over his head was anything to go by the next morning.

Callaghan and Powell wisely didn't say much to him, sensing that he needed to be left alone. It's a clear indicator of how far down the stupid fucking rabbit hole of despair Steve is if even Callaghan kept his big trap shut.

Flo gave him a suspicious once over first thing that morning, her eyes lingering on what he knows are the dark circles under his eyes—a tell

tale neon sign advertising a sleepless night (or three). She didn't say much to him, but a little while later she deposited a piping hot cup of chamomile tea with a wordless pat on his shoulder.

By lunchtime it all went sideways.

The little bit of peace Steve found in his cup of tea disappeared with the phone call from his landlord.

"Harrington. You're out. Get your stuff by the end of the day." The drawl of his sleazy landlord's voice and the subsequent sharp click of the phone jarred Steve out of his stunned stupor.

Numb, he hung the phone up and tried to take a deep, deep breath.

"Who was that Harrington? Another prank caller?" Powell called tentatively.

His chest couldn't expand. The deep breath he tried to take was more like a sip and it wasn't enough.

Steve needed to get out.

Now.

NOW.

The walls in the police station are too tight—too close—too suffocating.

He can't breathe.

Without a word, Steve lurched to his feet and headed for the back door of the station.

"Harrington?" Powell called after him, but it sounds far away, like a badly tuned radio in the other room.

The crisp early fall air doesn't help. His breaths are shallow, and the world is starting to tilt.

Confusion and panic set in—why can't he breathe?

Steve sucked in a strange, shuddering breath and tried to put a lid on it all.

While the call from his landlord wasn't completely unexpected, it was the breaking point. The stress that was boiling over from every pore of his body, the sharp sting of his father's words... He was a failure, he couldn't pay his rent, he couldn't make it on his own and he'd have to go crawling back to his asshole of a dad and—

A cool hand gently touched his arm, startling him out of his spiral. The world stopped tilting and a sort of calmness washed over him.

"Breathe." The person instructed firmly, before taking a deep breath.

He couldn't even see who it was—his vision too hazy, but the voice sounded familiar and he latched on to the comfort that it brought. They took two more, deep breaths and let them out slowly before Steve realized he was mirroring their actions.

He wasn't sure how long it was that they did this, but slowly, slowly his vision returned and the erratic beating of his heart petered out into a steady, reassuring thump.

Steve blinked in surprise when he saw Eleven standing in front of him, her fingers gently touching his arm as though to anchor him in place.

She watched him with her fathomlessly dark gaze, seemingly knowing that he'd come back into himself. With a slow movement as to not startle him, she caught his hand in her own and gently pried his palm open and up.

He watched as she ripped the Eggo she had in her other hand in half and placed the larger half in the palm of his hand.

It was dry and a little floppy, clearly Eleven made the Eggo a while ago. She wordlessly pressed the toaster waffle into his hand, but she didn't move any further away from him, nor did she move closer.

"Eggos always help." Was all she said when he glanced up at her in speechless astonishment.

Eleven didn't share Eggos.

Hell, even Wheeler was lucky if he got a bite!

But here she was, willingly splitting her Eggo, her most beloved food, with him: Steve Harrington.

Worthless, an embarrassment, a failure of a son: Steve Harrington.

He tried to fight back the stinging sensation behind his eyes.

Eleven didn't say another word; she simply stepped beside him and slid down to the ground, her back against the brick wall. She patted the ground beside her, and Steve took it as his cue to sit.

The cool brick at his back felt good. Eleven didn't say a word still, so he followed her lead and took a bite of the Eggo. Weirdly, it did make him feel better.

They finished their waffle in silence, but it wasn't a bad one. Truthfully, Steve was grateful for the quiet because it let him get his head on straight. He wasn't sure what just happened. He never experienced that kind of feeling in his life and honestly, he wasn't sure whether to cry, yell or laugh.

A few minutes later, when he finally felt composed enough, he said, "Thanks, Hopper."

Eleven nodded seriously, her brow furrowed in concern.

Steve glanced down the alley behind the police station and then back to Eleven. "What are you doing out here, anyways?"

He was desperate for any kind of distraction right now.

"Lunch with Hop."

"Oh, right." Steve said lamely.

Of course. Eleven often came to have lunch with Hopper at the station when she and the other little shitheads weren't up to anything. School started soon—so she wouldn't be able to have lunch

at the station during the week anymore.

"Do you want to have lunch with us?" She asked.

Steve let out a small chuckle. "Thanks, but I'll take a rain check."

Eleven glanced at him quizzically. "Rain check?"

Steve realized his mistake in using a colloquialism.

Eleven improved leaps and bounds in her speech, writing and reading, but slangs and sayings were something she worked hard to not wrap her head around too literally.

"Yeah, it means another time."

Eleven nodded thoughtfully and went to get up. She hesitated for a moment, before doing something that took him completely off guard.

She hugged him.

He was so shocked, he barely remembered to return the hug.

Sure, he'd seen Eleven hug Hopper, Dustin, Lucas, Will and especially Max and Mike—but this was the first time she ever hugged him.

"Rain check." Eleven nodded deeply, her words spoke the weight of a solemn promise. She disappeared into the back door of the station a moment later.

Steve sighed and took a few more steadying breaths. He didn't know what he was going to do just yet, but for the sake of his sanity; he would tackle this shit storm one thing at a time.

...

His landlord was kind enough to leave his belongings on the curb. Steve pulled into the parking lot of his now previous apartment complex and cursed when he saw the boxes sitting in the open.

To his immense relief his most prized possession—the bat with nails sticking out of it Jonathan Byers once made—was still there. Steve

liked to keep that thing within reach at all times, his fingers still itched with the sensation of swinging it into the flesh of the Demogorgon and the Demodogs. It was a sensation he sincerely hoped he would never have to feel again, but the bat brought him a serene sense of comfort.

With a sort of detached, numbness, Steve collected the rest of his meager belongings from the curb and shoved them into his car.

It was only after he'd been driving around aimlessly for an hour that he pulled over and rested his head against the steering wheel in defeat.

Where could he go?

Over his cold, dead body would he go home. Not that his dad would let him in after last night's cheery dinner anyways.

He briefly thought about calling Hopper, but that too was dismissed.

Steve didn't want to be a burden. Hopper Cabin was tiny. Adding a third person to the small home would be ridiculous. Hopper already had his hands full with one super powered teenager—he didn't need another person to worry about.

Steve didn't even consider asking any of the 'party'.

None of the shitheads could help him and he really didn't want them to know about this. They were kids. He didn't want them worrying about him. They should be more concerned about teenager stuff like video games and who knows what other kind of nerdy crap. They already had enough worrying and craziness in their short lives with all the Upside Down shit.

He didn't need to add to that.

...

At eleven o' clock Steve pulled over onto a deserted road on the outskirts of town and prepared to try and get some sleep for the night. The sleek BMW, while nice to drive, was never intended for someone to sleep in.

It took him a half hour to even find a position comfortable enough that it didn't leave a limb numb. He'd just have to live with the serious crick in his neck.

He was so busy trying to find a comfy way to settle down that he didn't notice the car pull to a stop behind his.

Knock, knock, knock! The sound of someone rapping their knuckles on the car window nearly was unexpectedly harsh in the overwhelming quiet of the car. Steve jumped, hitting his head on the roof in his haste to sit up and try to hide the sleeping bag on his lap.

It was Joyce Byers.

Blinking in surprise, Steve rolled down the window hastily. "H-hey Mrs. Byers. How's it going?"

Joyce clearly hadn't been expecting him.

"It is you, Steve. I thought I recognized the car. I know it's strange to be worried," she glanced warily at the forest surrounding them, "but I don't like this road or the thought of anyone stopped here. What are you..." Joyce trailed off when she spotted the rather sad assortment of boxes and the sleeping bag Steve tried to shove under the seat before she could see it.

"Oh—Mirkwood. Right. Byers—I mean, Will—told me he doesn't like this road. I was only stopped for a second." Steve tried to fib as believably as possible.

Joyce clearly wasn't buying the load of shit he was trying to shovel. She leveled him with her best 'mom stare'.

"Steve."

It was Steve's turn to trail off, unsure of what to say. He didn't want to tell Mrs. Byers the truth—that he was a loser who couldn't pay his rent and his landlord kicked him out and now he had no where to go. It was already mortifying enough.

"Well," Joyce glanced back at her car; not waiting for him to even try to come up with something remotely plausible, "you're following me home. You can crash in Jonathan's room as long as you need."

He definitely wasn't expecting that.

Steve opened his mouth to protest, but Joyce held up a firm hand and he stopped cold.

"No questions asked. I don't need to know anything. But if you don't follow me, I call Hop. Understand?"

Steve gulped. "Yes Mrs. Byers."

"Good." With that, Joyce turned on her heel and walked briskly back to her car. A moment later, Steve heard the engine start, and moments later the little pinto zoomed by.

All he could do was follow.

...

"Here you go, these are fresh out of the wash." Joyce piled a set of sheets on top of the blankets piled precariously in Steve's arms. She eyed him suspiciously. "Are you sure you'll be warm enough with those?"

Steve could only nod, but stopped when it shifted the ridiculously large pile of blankets.

"Jonathan's room is here. Will's probably asleep by now, but he'll be up and about in the morning. Bathroom is right there," Joyce indicated the slightly ajar door across the hall, "use whatever you need and don't be afraid to come find me if you need something. My room is at the end of the hall."

She reached into Jonathan's room and flicked on the light.

The room was very Jonathan. All artsy photos, and most prominently, an impressive looking record player and sound system on the far side. Like the rest of the Byers' home, Jonathan's room looked lived in, but radiated warmth.

"Here, I'll help you make the bed." Joyce plucked the sheets off of the pile of blankets.

He followed after a moment, hastily setting down the blankets at the foot of the bed and going to help her.

Between the two of them they had the bed made in sixty seconds flat.

After a brief, last fluff of the pillow, Joyce said, "goodnight Steve." She turned to go, and almost made it out of the doorway before he managed to speak.

"Mrs. Byers—wait, please."

She caught herself on the doorway and turned back to him curiously.

"I..." Steve swallowed the thick lump in his throat and willed his voice not to break, "thank you. For this. I promise I'll just stay the one night."

Joyce sighed and smiled at him. "You can stay as long as you need to. You are always welcome in our home, Steve. Now get some rest."

Steve nodded, choked up. "Goodnight Mrs. Byers."

"Call me Joyce."

She disappeared around the corner, the hall light flicking off a minute later.

Steve slowly and quietly got ready for bed, feeling somehow at loss and at ease in the Byers' home. He'd been here a handful of times—that first night when he faced the Demogorgon with Nancy and Jonathan, the night Billy beat his face in and a few impromptu times after that. Somehow, despite some of his memories being rather painful in association with the Byers' home, it was still comforting.

He settled down under the blankets. It felt a little strange to be taking Jonathan's bed, but Steve was far too tired and emotionally drained to care. He drifted off almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

...

"Steve... breakfast..."

Through the thick haziness of sleep, Steve finally became aware enough to realize someone was calling his name. With a groan, he managed to pry his eyes open and an unfamiliar ceiling came into focus.

"Wha?" He rolled over, only to come face to face with Will Byers.

"Holy shit!" Steve rolled off the other side of the bed in surprise, landing in a tangled heap of blankets and limbs. The events of yesterday came flooding back. Being kicked out by his landlord. Having some sort of strange moment of panic and then... driving around until Joyce Byers found him about to camp out in his car.

"Whoa, are you okay?" Will asked worriedly.

Steve groaned but managed to get up from the floor without any more mishaps. "Yeah, I'm fine. What day is it?"

Will's brow furrowed.

"It's Thursday."

Steve let out a sigh of relief. It was his day off then. He hadn't overslept. After such a disorientating wakeup, he was worried he mixed up the days.

"Sorry I scared you," Will apologized sheepishly, "I tried knocking but you didn't hear me. Mom says breakfast is ready."

Steve blinked in surprise; he really hadn't been expecting Joyce to make enough breakfast for him too. After a moment, he realized Will was eyeing him in concern. "Thanks. I'll be right there."

Will nodded, casting him one last concerned glance before heading out of Jonathan's bedroom.

Steve quickly threw on his clothes from yesterday and made a quick stop in the bathroom to freshen up. He looked pretty terrible—dark circles under his eyes and pale, but he did feel a lot more rested than he had over the last few days.

"Morning Steve." Joyce greeted when he nearly walked past the

doorway of the kitchen.

"Morning Mrs. Byers—Joyce." He corrected upon her stern look.

She smiled and waved at him to have a seat.

He plopped into the seat across from Will, who was already digging into breakfast and attempting to shade in one of his drawings at the same time. It was just past seven thirty and Steve felt strangely at ease, and somehow out of place all at once in the morning routine of the two Byers.

Joyce busied herself at the stove, attempting to flip the French toast on the pan. When she realized he was watching she grinned apologetically.

"Jonathan used to do most of the cooking. So I hope you like slightly burnt French toast."

"It smells great."

He didn't miss the inquisitive glances Will shot him every now and again. They weren't hostile in any way, there wasn't a mean bone in Will's body as Steve had come to learn—his glances were more curious.

It looked like Joyce hadn't told Will much, if anything about why he was here. Not that Joyce knew everything either, but she was a very smart woman and she could easily put it together.

"Less drawing more eating breakfast, Will. It's almost time to go." Joyce called from the stove without turning around, knowing exactly what her youngest was up to.

"Yes mom." Will quickly shoveled the French toast into his mouth just as Joyce set down a plate for herself and for Steve. She slid a cup of coffee across the table, which he gratefully accepted.

Joyce barely started eating when Will finished his toast. He quickly stood, deposited his plate in the sink and went to get ready for the day.

It was really... nice having breakfast with people again. Steve had gotten so accustomed to the quiet loneliness of his apartment and eating most of his meals alone that this was a treat.

It was Joyce who broke the comfortable silence after a few minutes.

"So," She began pleasantly, taking a sip of her coffee, "I think we can safely assume that you're no longer living at your apartment?"

Steve hurriedly swallowed the large mouthful of French toast.

"Yeah." He admitted, cheeks flushing, "I uh... couldn't afford the rent."

Joyce made a noise of affirmation, like he'd just confirmed a hunch of hers.

"Well, I happen to have Tuesdays' paper in the living room. You can look at the classifieds if you want, but there is absolutely no rush for you to leave."

Steve opened and closed his mouth; Joyce had successfully nipped his protests before he could even begin. He did the only thing he could do in this situation.

"Thank you. I promise I'll repay you somehow."

Joyce waved him off, not unkindly. "It's nice having another person around."

She smiled and gave his hand a comforting squeeze across the table. "If you want to talk about anything, I'm here for you. Oops. Except right now. We have to get going!" Joyce quickly ate the rest of her breakfast and grabbed her cup of coffee just as Will appeared in the doorway.

"Help yourself to anything you want. We'll be home around four."

Steve said goodbye to the Byers and listened as the sound of the pinto disappeared into the distance.

He headed to the living room and managed to find the newspaper Joyce was talking about and got settled.

...

Aside from Dustin calling him on the walkie-talkie to pester him every night about why he was staying at the Byers, it was a peaceful couple of days.

Will took his presence in his home as though Steve had always been there. Admittedly, he liked having Steve around because Will still was uneasy being home alone. Having another body in the house was a comfort, even if it wasn't Jonathan.

Joyce felt much the same way, especially when she was called in to cover a sick coworker's shift on Saturday afternoon.

"You guys will be alright? I won't be home until late tonight." Joyce asked as she hastily put on her coat and grabbed her car keys.

"We're good mom."

Steve nodded.

He said a quick goodbye to Joyce before turning his attention back to the newspaper in front of him. Joyce was kind enough to grab a copy of the most recent newspaper.

He wasn't having much luck looking for a new apartment. Everything was either too expensive or too far away—in the next town over. It would cost him more in gas to drive to work every day than it would to eat. Hopper couldn't increase his salary until his probation was up and Steve was determined to make it until then, even if he had to pick up a second job to do it.

"Hey, Steve?"

Steve blinked and looked up from the jobs section of the classifieds.

Will stood awkwardly in the doorway of the kitchen, looking nervous about something.

"What's up?"

"Dustin just radioed me." Will blurted, "he said they need help."

Steve frowned. The last time Dustin called for help, it had been a code red situation... well, a different kind of code red anyways. What could it be this time?

"Is everything okay?"

Will shrugged. "He said there's a spider at Hopper Cabin and they're too scared to kill it. I could hear Mike and Lucas freaking out in the background."

Steve stared at Will, completely dumbfounded. "Are you serious?"

Will sighed and nodded. "It's one of those big, hairy wood spiders, if that helps."

"It doesn't."

The youngest Byers looked guilty for a moment, peering down at his shoes. "Dustin wanted me to lie and tell you it was a code red, but I didn't want to."

Oh.

For.

Fucks.

Sake.

"Are you kidding me?" Steve slammed the newspaper down and stood, startling the heck out of Will. "I am going to murder that little shithead after I kill the spider."

Will followed after him tentatively, watching as Steve snagged his car keys from the table and stomped towards the front door.

"So you're going?"

"No. We're going. I'm going to have a long overdue talk with you brats about what constitutes an actual code red." Steve half shouted, yanking the front door open.

Will the wise, wisely after him without any protest.

...

Hopper Cabin looked the same as it always did, nestled in the midst of the trees. On better days, Steve would admire the changing leaves, or the fresh air or the sounds of nature... but today was not one of those days. He was a man on a fucking mission.

Steve stepped over the tripwire and let Will lead the way up the steps.

He already had a forty-five-minute lecture planned for those little assholes. God knows he'd gotten enough lectures from Hopper since starting at the station and he was going to put some of those tactics to use!

"I just have to tie my shoe. Go ahead." Will kneeled down to tie his shoelace on the front porch.

Steve nodded and raised his fist to bang on the cabin door, but it opened on its own before he could pound on it.

He was only confused for a moment before he realized Eleven must have heard him coming and opened the door with her powers. He sighed and steeled himself once more.

"Alright, where's this spider you guys are all too chicken shit to kill? Because afterwards we're going to have a long talk about—"

"SURPRISE!"

Steve just about died.

He floated off the ground in shock, his soul temporarily taking leave of his body at the sheer unexpectedness of the loud greeting. It didn't get any better as the excited hoard of teenagers mobbed him from their hiding places. Dustin, Lucas, Max, Mike, Eleven and Will crowded around him excitedly. Joyce and Hopper watched bemusedly from the living room.

"Dude! You were so surprised!"

"We got you SO good!"

"You should have seen your face!"

It was only Hopper's amused chuckle that drew Steve out of his stunned stupor and everything clicked into place.

The greeting. The alarming number of streamers and balloons—the party hats.

It was a birthday party.

For him?

Steve soundlessly glanced behind him, half expecting to see someone else standing there—someone that this whole hubbub was actually meant for. There was no one but himself.

"Was there even a spider?" Steve blurted.

"Yes," Max rolled her eyes, "you should have seen it, Harrington. Eleven and I had to take care of it because these useless nerds wouldn't stop screaming." She elbowed Lucas and Mike, who blushed.

"Happy birthday Steve!" Dustin's exclaimed excitedly, moving past the spider issue, "I'm starving and now that you're finally here, we can dig in!"

"Happy birthday Steve!" The other kids said in one variation or another, dispersing into the cabin to begin the party.

Was it his birthday? Steve did the math in his head—he'd been so caught up with his situation that he didn't even realize it was Friday—his birthday!

He stood, rooted to the spot, unable to move until Joyce came over and gave him a warm hug. So much for her being called in to work at Melvald's!

"Happy birthday." She said kindly, pressing a kiss against his cheek before she released him.

"T-thanks Mrs—I mean Joyce." Steve stammered, finally rebooting when Hopper clapped him on the back.

Hopped smirked. "Surprised, Harrington?"

Steve could only nod, overwhelmed. He watched Dustin and Lucas begin to squabble over the best kind of pizza, watched Will head towards Hopper's record player to put on some tunes, and watched Mike let Eleven rub a balloon on his hair to see the static. She giggled when it stuck to his head and made his hair all floofy.

"Good. Happy birthday." Hopper grinned and ruffled his hair in affection.

And it was.

A good portion of the night was spent in disbelief that these little shitheads would go and throw him a surprise birthday party. Even he forgot it was his birthday.

How did they even know when his birthday was, anyways?

When he asked, Eleven and Dustin smirked at each other.

"Driver's license." They chimed in eerie unison.

Right. They'd pulled the same stunt with Hopper earlier that year. The little jerks likely pickpocketed his wallet at some point, but Steve didn't mind.

When it was half past nine Joyce emerged from Eleven's room with a cake and candles.

Dustin, Will, Mike, Eleven, Lucas, Max, Joyce and even Hopper sang a horribly off-key rendition of Happy Birthday, and no one finished singing at the same time.

Joyce placed the cake in front of Steve and he looked at it, dumbfounded all over again.

The cake was clearly made with lots of love. It looked like it had been dropped on the ground twice and it was slathered in so much icing it was bowing in the middle.

"Yeah, we kind of suck at baking cakes. But it tastes really good." Dustin misinterpreted why Steve was currently staring at the cake

like an idiot instead of blowing out his candles. The nervous tone in Dustin's voice kicked Steve into action.

"It's great." Steve said sincerely, willing himself not to cry in front of all these goddamn teens. He'd never hear the end of it if they knew how much their gesture meant to him.

They all grinned, pleased.

"What are you waiting for Harrington? Blow out your candles!" Lucas gestured to the now half melted candles impatiently.

"Yeah, yeah, hold your horses Sinclair." He tried to inject his usual cockiness into his voice, but it just came out thick with emotion instead. He took a deep breath and blew out all the candles.

After cake, the kids delivered a final surprise.

Dustin dumped a poorly wrapped lump into his lap. "Here you go, Harrington. We all pitched in for it. Hopper and Mrs. Byers too."

The six teens eyed him so earnestly; it was all Steve could do but to rip open the present to reveal:

A brand spanking new walkie-talkie.

"Shit." Steve glanced up at the teens in shock; this thing probably cost them all their arcade money for a month!

Dustin grinned. "Now you don't have to worry about the old one dying on you anymore."

"Thanks guys." Steve meant it, wholly and sincerely with every bone in his body.

As the night wound down and three out of the six party members were passed out on the couch, Steve dumped a load of dishes into the sink, lost in thought.

The kids threw him a party and got him a new walkie-talkie to match theirs.

Mrs. Byers helped decorate and supervised the making of the cake.

Even Hopper had been in on the surprise, springing for the pizza and soft drinks.

It was easily his best birthday ever.

He couldn't help but compare tonight with the bitter dinner at his parent's house earlier that week. The strained conversation, the cutting words from his father, his mother lying to his face... It was no contest.

Steve would take the obnoxiously loud, always-getting-into-trouble-teens and their rag tag team of adults any day. With them, he felt a deep warmth resonating in his bones, a comfort and safety he no longer felt at home—or maybe never had.

And that was a really depressing realization.

Once he helped clean up a little more and Joyce shepherded the kids to get dressed for bed (the girls taking El's room, the boys on the couch and floor in the living room), Steve said his goodbyes and headed out onto the porch.

Hopper was waiting for him, having stepped out a minute ago for a smoke. The chief gestured to Steve to join him. For a moment neither of them said anything. In the distance an owl hooted and the wind shifted the leaves in the trees, but it was the most at peace Steve had felt all week.

"I've got a trailer," Hopper broke the silence before taking a drag of his cigarette, "it's been empty for a while now."

Steve wasn't following, but the Chief didn't leave him hanging for long.

"There's been some vandalism around town lately as you know... And it would be nice to have a body I could trust in there."

Steve stared at Hopper in disbelief. Was he saying what he thought he was saying?

"It might need a good clean because it's been a while since I've been in there, but it's a place to stay." Hopper fished something out of his pocket and held it out. "Here."

Steve held his hand out and Hopper dropped a set of keys into his outstretched palm. He stared at his hand like it had grown a whole other set of fingers on its own. Silence stretched between them.

These were the keys to Hopper's trailer. Hopper was giving him the keys to his own home.

This whole night was too much.

This was too much.

Steve took a deep breath. "Sir, I can't take these."

"You already did." Hopper said bemusedly.

He tried again.

"I can't take your home from you."

Hopper sighed and massaged the bridge of his nose in a gesture Steve knew to be his "dealing with bullshit" move.

"Look kid. You're not 'taking my home' from me. I need a trustworthy body in that trailer. Heck, it probably needs a little work so if you're up to it you can help out. If you're really conflicted, pay a little rent. Do whatever the hell you want. But I wouldn't offer this if I didn't mean it. I trust you."

Face burning, all Steve could do was mumble, "thanks Hop."

Hopper didn't answer at first, putting out his cigarette. "I'm not sure what's going on with your parents and I don't need to know, Harrington, if you don't want to tell me. I came from half a real family...but the beauty of being an adult is that you can make a new family."

Steve nodded thoughtfully, letting the Chief's words sink in.

"Now, I'm tired and I've got to make sure those hooligans are actually going to bed. Goodnight Harrington." Hopper nodded and turned to head back into the cabin. He reached for the handle at the same moment it flew open and Dustin nearly mowed him down.

"Watch it." Hopper grumbled. Dustin apologetically sidestepped him before catching sight of Steve.

"Steve! Wait." Dustin called, loping down the steps of the cabin to catch up to him. "I have one more thing for you."

The teen held out another lumpy package. "Don't tell the others, they don't know I got this for you and I don't want them to feel bad."

Curious, Steve accepted and carefully unwrapped the lumpy package.

It was a Star Wars mug.

Most possibly the geekiest thing on the planet—Steve already knew it was going to be his new office mug, proudly displayed for everyone to see.

"We match now—I've got one at home too." Dustin beamed happily.

Steve slung his arm around Dustin's shoulder and tousled his hair. "Trying to turn me into a mega nerd like you?"

"Welcome to the dark side."

Steve snorted and Dustin managed to finally wiggle out of his grasp.

"One more thing." Dustin leveled Steve with a steely gaze. "I know the last time I said this you just had your face beat in by Billy and I'm pretty sure you had a concussion, but... the bottom line is, if a party member requires assistance, it is our duty to provide that assistance. You are a party member, Steve."

Of course.

For how much Steve didn't want the kids to know about his situation—they'd found out anyways. He was dumb to think he could keep it from them. If it hadn't been through Will, it would have been

someway else. It shocked him that these teens could so fiercely have his back, that they made him feel like he deserved to have their support.

Steve could only nod, too overcome by emotions. He'd been speechless a lot tonight.

"Also, Max told me to tell you that if you ever don't let us know that a party member needs help again," Dustin gestured at Steve, "then she's going to, and I quote: kick your ass so hard your future kids will have craters in their butt cheeks."" And I agree with her. Everyone does. Understand?"

Steve laughed thickly and ruffled Dustin's hair one more time just to annoy him. "Yeah, I understand. And in Max's case, I believe it."

"Good. She scares me."

"Me too buddy."

They gave their secret handshake before parting ways for the evening, Steve feeling so much warmer and lighter than he had in the last couple of days.

Whoever said you can't choose your family?

Steve's family chose him.